US Army Corps of Engineers
New Orleans District

Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA)
NEAR-TERM ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PLAN

EVOLUTION OF COASTAL RESTORATION IN LOUISIANA

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The Problem

Coastal land losses in Louisiana from 1932 to 2000 amounted to 1,900 square miles. Coastal land losses in Louisiana began to exceed levels normally associated with natural coastal ecosystem changes during the 1950s. Since then, 34 square miles of marsh have been lost each year. The first mapping studies in the 1970s and subsequent mapping studies have quantified those trends. Without an elevated effort to arrest losses on basin future losses are projected to reach approximately 700 additional square miles over the next 50 years.

Many Initiatives

Over the past three decades, both the Federal and State governments have established policies and programs that are intended to halt and reverse the loss of Louisiana's coastal wetlands and to restore and enhance their functionality. Key initiatives (among others) include: the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (1972), Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation, Restoration and Management Act (1989), Louisiana Act 6 (1989), Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (1990), The Gulf of Mexico Program (1991), and Sections 204, 206, and 1135 of the Water Resources Development Acts (of 1986, 1992, and 1996)

CWPPRA, A Focused Response

Passage (1990) of the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (PL-101-646, Title III, CWPPRA) provided Federal authorization and funding to address coastal wetland losses in Louisiana and elsewhere in the Nation. CWPPRA (or Breaux Act) specifically created a multi-agency task force tasked to curtail the rapidly mounting wetland losses in Louisiana. The CWPPRA Program, matched with state authorities, has and continues to serve as a vehicle for implementing Federal and state cost-shared projects that yield restoration benefits predominantly at local scales.

Lessons Learned

Project results and lessons learned from the CWPPRA process then and now: 1) crystallized the regional and national ramifications of Louisiana's coastal land losses; and, 2) that many more benefits could be derived from comprehensive basin scale coastal restoration efforts. Conceptually, emphasizing projects that mimic or restore natural hydrology and sediment introduction processes that build and maintain coastal Louisiana could deliver restoration, economic and social benefits on state, regional and national scales and compliment the many CWPPRA generation projects already delivering localized restoration benefits.

COAST 2050, A Strategic Approach: Regions, Basins

The "Coast 2050: Toward a Sustainable Coastal Louisiana" report (1998), known as the *Coast 2050 Plan*, was the next step. The Coast 2050 Plan identifies river diversions, marsh creations, barrier island restoration and protection, and hydrologic restoration as examples of the project types that offer solutions that can be applied in a strategic context in each of four regions – collectively consisting of nine distinct hydrologic basins – comprising the Louisiana coastal zone. The Plan, and outgrowth of the CWPPRA process, is the product of the cooperative efforts of the public, local governments and interests, the State of Louisiana and the Federal agencies charged with restoring and protecting the remainder of Louisiana's valuable coastal wetlands. The Coast 2050 Plan has received the written support from all 20 of Louisiana's coastal parishes.

In 1999, reflecting the Coast 2050 Plan vision, the U.S. Army, Corps of Engineers (USACE) partnered with the State of Louisiana and in 2000 initiated the first of several planned feasibility reports to be prepared roughly in sequence over a 10-year period. Collectively, those feasibility reports would translate the Coast 2050 basin strategies into sets of candidate projects specific to each basin. The first of those reports focused on the Barataria Basin where the need was greatest and the predominant strategies were marsh creation and shoreline protection.

LCA, Moving From Strategies to Implementable, Cost Effective Actions

Shortly thereafter, state and Federal participants agreed it was imperative to abbreviate the number and duration of independent feasibility studies in favor of one in-depth, comprehensive, equally cost-shared assessment of the feasibility of coastwide restoration in Louisiana. That decision led to the formation of the Louisiana Coastal Area (LCA) Comprehensive Coastwide Ecosystem Restoration Study Team in March 2002.

This multi-agency LCA team worked to submit the next level of analysis and documentation necessary to obtain Federal funding though the 2004 Water Resources Development Act to conduct the coastwide feasibility study. The study efforts resulted in production of the draft Louisiana Coastal Area Comprehensive Coastwide Ecosystem Restoration study report and Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (DPEIS). The report and DPEIS identified an array of seven coastwide alternatives that would provide a sustainable coastal ecosystem with the essential functions, assets, and values of the natural ecosystem. However, these reports were never released for public review. The Corps received further guidance on February 2, 2004 in the form of the FY 05 President's Budget Guidance:

"In 2004, the Corps will work to issue a draft report that identifies the most critical ecological needs and proposes a near-term program of highly cost-effective projects to address them. The report will also highlight the key long-term scientific uncertainties and engineering challenges facing the effort to protect and restore the ecosystem, and propose demonstration projects and studies to help answer these questions. The report will focus on the specific coastal areas that require the most immediate attention and on the best way to sequence the proposed work over the next 10 or so years, as we learn what works best. In 2004 the Corps will begin developing studies of potentially promising, long-term ecosystem restoration concepts, with the objective of determining whether they would provide a cost-effective way to create coastal wetlands. An existing Federal-State Task Force established under 1990 legislation will increase its efforts to build and evaluate highly cost-effective fresh-water and sediment diversion projects. This coordinated approach to restoration combines a commitment to address the highest priority needs with a search for innovative solutions. It also ensures that the coastal Louisiana restoration effort will, in the long-term, be able to adapt and evolve as needed, based on the best available science."

LCA Near-term Ecosystem Restoration Plan

The Corps and the state continue to work together to develop this refined, near-term program of action for restoration of coastal Louisiana. The near-term program will include immediate opportunities for achieving restoration, as well as large-scale studies that define longer-term measures.

Since the revised Administration guidance issued on February 2, 2004 changed the focus of the study, the Corps is now working to start and complete the required NEPA public review process focusing on a near-term plan no later than June 30, 2004, and completion of a Chief's Report in December 2004.

A Chief's Report is a necessary step to support the inclusion of the develop of the Near-term Ecosystem Restoration Plan as a funded action item in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) legislation currently pending in Congress.

The public scooping meetings currently being held are part of the required public NEPA process.